

The Bacchanalia: How Wine Set the Stage  
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A CAPSTONE PROJECT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the acknowledgement

Honors Distinction

English  
School of Humanities, Communications and Fine Arts

TYLER JUNIOR COLLEGE  
Tyler, Texas

2015

## ABSTRACT

Alcohol has been one of the key components of all early civilizations. Analyzing the literature of Rome and ancient Greece, we can see the importance of wine in the culture of ancient Rome. It fueled their expansion, religion, horticulture, social structure and reforms. Identifying Rome's imperialist culture where wine played a major role in trade routes and the land Rome conquered, the God of wine Bacchus/Dionysus, the reverence to wine horticulture, the acknowledgment of the drink in social reform and eventually leading towards components of early Christianity. Using poetry and mythology, we can use this as a historical lens of how important alcohol was to the formation of civilization. A natural timeline begins to express itself. When looking through the lenses of both Literature and History, the poetry being used for the topics turns out to be sequentially, with the exception of the god Bacchus, who would still be expounded upon later on in Roman Society. This Linearity gives us the easiest view to look at the place of Wine in Rome. The impact of wine in Roman society is simply too great to ignore. Perhaps, Without Wine, there would be no Roman Empire. No conquest, growth of Christianity, or spread of democratic ideas. Wine was the lifeblood of Rome. It fueled everything they did. Without the fermented grape, society as we know it would never have emerged. We owe a certain reverence to Alcohol, and literature is shown to be one of the canvases to best honor it.

'In what role did wine play in Roman civilization?' Analyzing literature provides a different outlet of history. It gives insight into the hearts and minds of the Roman people. That being said, finding

themes and bits of story are fine, but to have real context, there needs to be knowledge of historical precedent. By using the methodology of Ancient Literature coupled with Historical Text, we not only get the objectivity of history, but also the humanity of Literature. Without Historical context, Georgics loses its political statements, and Catullus just seems like a weird ancient frat boy. Picking and choosing from poetry collections was easier than it seems. When we look at the importance of wine, it's no surprise that there are so many Greco-Roman poetic standards which incorporate the drink. Great lengths were taken to keep literature as the core subject matter, but as the project progressed the split became fifty-fifty in regards to balance of history and literature.

There are multiple subject matters to look at. Rome's imperialist culture, Wine in religion, the reverence to the wine grower, the acknowledgment of the drink in social reform. Looking at the linearity, the best place to start is the expansion of Rome.

The Poems in Horaces Odes describe events of war and conquering which are 'fueled' wine [3]. This holds true both figuratively and literally, as it can be cross referenced to show that even though Romans drank wine like water, part of the tradition of going to war under Caesar involved getting tipsy in the face of battle. Furthermore the Romans practiced libation, the ritual of pouring liquid as an offering "Every man puts a period to the day amid his own hills, and weds the vine to the widowed elm-trees; hence he returns joyful to his wine, and invites you, as a deity, to his second course; thee, with many a prayer, thee he pursues with wine poured out [in libation] from the cups" [3]. This quotation from Odes V is addressed to Augustus, the emperor of Rome, offering a blessing to his conquests. In a more figurative sense, expansion had huge ties with wine growth and trade. Certain accounts have stated that when Roman Legions came, so did wine traders. It's not hard to believe as the areas first

conquered by Rome are to this day some of the highest producing wine regions on the planet. Terraconisis, Narbonesis, and Parts of Epirius. (Eastern Spain, Southern France, and Western Greece/Albania respectively). [14] [15][16]. Horace (which at their core are a sort of oral history of Roman events) supports this in his Odes. The time period of these poems falls in line with the first conquering of these of these regions. "Phyllis, I have a cask full of Abanian wine" "Who cares for the war of fierce Spain? Every man puts a period to the day amid his own hills, and weds the vine to the widowed elm-trees; hence he returns joyful to his wine" [3]. The wine grape was the true fruit of victory. One of the reasons Greece was so prized wasn't just because of its historical significance, but also the belief that Greek wine was the best wine. Through the Odes of Horace, it could even be argued that one of the major 'rituals' of Rome was coming back to wine as sort of comfort. In today's society, we still have this, as seen with the dependency of many veterans. As war was near constant in Roman society [15]. It is absolutely no surprise that wine was a comfort to the soldier. Wine is often seen as a symbol for blood, and with good reason. It was the lifeblood of res publica. Scholars believe, as wine was the primary drink it wasn't just heading the charge in expansion, but by proxy, it was possibly one of the most economically important crops in Roman civilization [17]. Without a doubt. Wine was instrumental in creating the backbone of the Roman Empire.

The way Bacchus falls in this sort of time line that comes up is strange. Most of Characteristics of that appear are from *Metamorphoses* which was published around 4 A.D. past the point of the majority of Roman expansion. Although most Roman gods are simply carbon copies of the Greek versions, as time went on Bacchus took on his own light. First we must look towards Dionysus as he contrasts with the later depictions of Bacchus. To say Dionysus was an upstanding individual simply wasn't true, but at his core. The god of the Vine was more regal than his later counter-part, depicted more of a ladies man, more attractive, and *slightly* less crude. "The joy-god Dionysus, the pure star/That shines amid the

gathering of the fruit.” [2]. In general, the caricature of Dionysus was somewhat light hearted, but he had darker aspects. These would be expanded into what we know in our depictions of Bacchus. Part of Dionysus was his sexual invigoration, but even so, he still loved and was kind. “Dionysus came upon the princess of Crete, Ariadne, when she was utterly desolate, having been abandoned on the shore of the island of Naxos by the Athenian prince, Theseus, whose life she had saved. Dionysus had compassion upon her. He rescued her, and in the end loved her. When she died Dionysus took a crown he had given her and placed it among the stars.” [2]. Although the mythology is technically the same for both, when Bacchus is described in *Metamorphoses*, he lacks this compassion and romanticism. The depictions of Dionysus in general are a lot more flattering. All things considered, we can definitely see one of the most overarching themes with Dionysus/Bacchus. The two opposing aspects of alcohol. The ecstasy and happiness, as well as the violence and anger [2]. It’s pretty clear where this metaphor comes from. As we’ll see later when we look at reforms, the Greeks and Romans were acute to the dangers of alcohol.

As we see Bacchus’s growth in later Roman literature, that line begins to fade in certain sects of Rome. Before we look at Bacchus’s depiction in *Metamorphoses*, we must view the stepping stone that would set Roman society towards a more deviant path. Catullus. In Catullus 64, Bacchus rescues Ariadne, but not in the same fervor as the Greek version. The love and kindness of Dionysus almost nonexistent. Instead, we get the focus of the aftermath of the Trojan war, and how Bacchus is welcomed to celebrate the worst parts of life. “Often roaming Liber (Bacchus) led from the highest peak of Parnassus...when, rushing in rivalry from the whole city, Delphians happily receive the god with smoking altars. Often in the death-bringing struggle of war,” [6]. In general, outside of this specific instance, when Catullus praises Bacchus it’s usually in the sake of debauchery. This set the framework for Bacchus as represented in *Metamorphoses*. Early writings of Dionysus shy away from sorts of pedophilia (although normal at the time.) [12]. As Dionysus was the god of fertility, even in context with the time,

it's not surprising it was not important in his myths. On the other hand, *Metamorphoses* puts an emphasis on the party norms of the time. "The young women and mothers obey, leaving their baskets and looms, and their unfinished tasks, and burn incense, calling on Bacchus, on Bromius, 'the noisy one', Lyaeus, 'deliverer from care', on the child of the lightning, the twice-born, the son of two mothers, and adding to these calls Nyseus, 'he of Heliconian Nysa', Thyoneus, 'the unshorn' who is Semele's son, Lenaeus." [7]. The main cause of analysis is the fact that Ovid does not shy away from the aspects of Roman sexuality, in some terms he's help creating a new identity for Bacchus. There are pieces of poetry here and there, but considering how popular Bacchus was, there is something strange in his depiction in *Metamorphoses*. Bacchus is not as well liked compared to the depictions of Dionysus. "'Be satisfied with us, be gentle' and they celebrate the rites ordained. Only the daughters of Minyas remain inside, disturbing the festival, with the untimely arts of Minerva, drawing out strands of wool, twisting the threads with their fingers, or staying at their looms, and plying their servants with work. Then one of them, Arsippe, speaks, spinning the thread lightly with her thumb. 'While the others are leaving their work, and thronging to this false religion... changed the bodies of youths into dumb fishes, until the same thing happened to her.'" [7]. Though otherwise not directly stated, it's implied that Bacchus is unruly and despicable. Declaring his worship simply irresponsible, and that Bacchus would ravage these pure maidens for the sake of merriment. Whereas Dionysus was depicted almost as a hero, there's a certain amount of disgust with this Roman interpretation of Bacchus. More than likely, this has a tie in with the drunken orgies known as Bacchanalias.

Many concerned citizens would rise up in protest of the Bacchanalias, going to the senate and pleading for reform, some even calling it a national emergency [10]. Though more than likely exaggerated, it did in fact happen. Not only did the literature become cruder, so did the worship. It's important to note that this came into practice around 100 BC up until the end of the Western Roman

Empire [14]. More than likely, the negative depiction in *Metamorphoses* was in reaction to frivolous worship. A natural push back would occur to view wine in a deeper sense, rather than just a tool of excess merriment without bounds. The Bacchanalia would actually positively be reformed into the Liberalia in 17 BC as described by Ovid [3]. It would focus on a more casual side of merriment. That being said, there was still a great deal of licentiousness happening at the gatherings. Sexuality was still presents, and Roman citizens felt free to express their inner desires.

Virgil's *Georgics* are a testament to those who cultivated wine. To not only to be reverent of the drink, but also to those who dedicate their life to crafting it for the glory of Rome. If anyone were to have forgotten the importance of agriculture; specifically wine, it was a wake up slap to the reality that a certain aspect of Roman culture would be left in the dust. Thus came a certain reverence towards wine. The Roman people would drink wine all day as the only alternative to water. Not only was the act of partaking in the drink seemingly holy, so was the act of making it. Something absolutely necessary to Roman society. [9] [14] [15]. Part of this was the 'Joy of True Life' "O farmers, more than happy if they've realised their blessings,/ for whom Earth unprompted, supreme in justice, pours out/a rich livelihood from her soil, far from the clash of armies!" [8]. In wake of excess wine consumption, the farmer seemingly was out of the picture. Virgil would argue throughout his piece that farming was the most pure thing someone could do. Even such a polarized substance like wine was still pure and wholesome at the core.

Not only that, through out Book II of *Georgics* where he goes into detail of the cultivation of wine and olives, he makes reference to the past and how the previously discussed expansion was because of wine. "Bacchus,/offering a libation, while his friends garland the bowl,/or he /sets up a target

on an elm, for the swift spear-throwing,/or they strip their tough bodies for the country-wrestling./The ancient Sabines once lived such a life,/and Remus and his brother, so Etruria grew strong,/so Rome became the loveliest of all things," [8]. In some ways, Virgil's *Georgics* was similar to this thesis. Rome needed a reminder of the civilization wine helped create. Worshiping it and considering the powers it holds based not only on the merriment it brings, but also on the cultural significance it holds. Even the style Virgil holds treats the growing, labor, and preparation of a vineyard, into some sort of heroic epic. In regards to later reforms in Roman society, Oliver Goldsmith mentions that around 25 B.C. movements towards reform started taking route [14]. Around the timeframe *Georgics* was most likely published. Considering the political motivations of Virgil and the fact it was in some ways addressed to the current emperor of Rome; Octavian [16]. It's not out of the realm of possibility that *Georgics* was a stepping stone to more reforms down the line.

The biggest reforms as we'd find would come through Christianity. Many scholars would often go on to say that after the Christian conversion of Rome, there is a distinct lack of truly great literature. Although this may be true to some extent, as writers were busy laying the groundworks of Christianity [14], wine wasn't left out. The reform of Roman society would heavily involve wine as a catalyst towards morality. St. Augustine of Hippo wrote of both the goodness in wine as well as the problem when faced with over indulgence. He himself felt the personal effects through his mother. Something that has always been a theme of alcohol in all civilizations. "For wine-bibbing did not lay siege to her spirit, nor did love of wine provoke her to hatred of the truth, as it doth too many (both men and women), who revolt at a lesson of sobriety, as men well-drunk at a draught mingled with water...never joined therewith more than one small cup of wine, diluted according to her own abstemious habit." [18]. With wine being so omnipresent and important in society, there was never an option to get rid of it. What is left the acknowledgement of both the good and evil of wine.

St. Augustine does not dissuade against the merriment it brings there is a certain holiness to it. It is up the individual's self-control. In fact, the Jewish symbolic tradition of mixing water with wine dates back to Greco-Roman influences. At first simply to dilute the very crude and heavy wine, to even later representing the blood of Christ, and symbolism towards remaining in control/beating temptation. Early Christian doctrine in ancient Rome extrapolated on having reverence to wine in a different way. Thus, Roman society would take strides to acknowledge both the good and evil of Alcohols influence. More than ever before. In something more than likely being a strange coincidence, when Roman societal reforms started happening, the Roman Empire got weaker. In general, the West Empire of Rome had much stronger convictions against alcohol compared to the East. There is no substantiated evidence, but it there is potentially a link. A more conservative view of wine hurts past traditions. Seemingly, as wine declined, Rome declined. Of course, Rome never truly fell until hundreds of years after 476. The legacy of Rome lived on through Byzantium. While western Rome fell, Byzantium would thrive. Is it a surprise that Orthodox Christianity was much more liberal in its view of wine? In the Fresco's of Byzantium one of the most quoted scriptures used was "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." From John 15:5. Whereas western Rome had bigger push back against alcohol, Byzantium sort of embraced it. Once again, there is no real empirical evidence, but knowing the cultural importance of wine. We are only left to wonder if embracing Alcohol instead of pushing it away holds together a society [18] [17] [11] [16].

The impact of wine in Roman society is simply too great to ignore. Perhaps, Without Wine, there would be no Roman Empire. No conquest, growth of Christianity, or spread of democratic ideas. Wine was the lifeblood of Rome. Through the lens of literature he have pieced together a Roman society we

would have not otherwise have seen. First, through primarily the works of Horace. Seeing in his writing the conquest and ritual of wine in regards to war. Coupled with history of Roman conquest and the clear ties with wine production. Eventually leading to the economic impacts of wine on the Roman economy. Second, comparing and contrasting Dionysus and Bacchus. Picking apart the dynamics the two and how past interpretations merged into a more crude god through the interpretations of Catullus and Ovid, which polarized the populace into either despising him or loving him. Next, the political impacts of Virgil's *Georgics* which set the center stage for later reforms and the acknowledgement of the wealth of wine in Roman society's traditions, and finally. How even in a dry spell of great literary works, wine still found its way into part of the centerpiece of writing. We have identified the importance of wine. Even more so, there's the chance that perhaps western civilization as we know it would utterly be non-existent without it.

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